

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 389-010**

**Interviewee: Flo Chessin**

**Interviewer: Dawn Walsh**

**Date of Interview: March 30, 2000**

**Project: Missoula Women for Peace Oral History Project**

Dawn Walsh: Hello, Flo.

Flo Chessin: Hi.

Dawn Walsh: I'd like to start our interview with some background information about yourself. First of all, when and where you were born?

Flo Chessin: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1926.

Dawn Walsh: And you were raised, brought up in Ohio then? Did you go to school there?

Flo Chessin: Yeah, I did. I lived there until I went to get married. Yeah, I got active in high school during the War. We were collecting newspapers and fat for soap, I can remember, and scrap metals. That was our patriotic thing. We were just teenagers. Yah, I went to school, do you want to know where I went to schools? You don't need to know that, do you?

Then, I met my husband just after I graduated high school. He was serving in the military, and he was assigned to Ohio State University, which is in Columbus, in the Army's Specialized Training Program. Actually, I was working as a U.S.O. hostess, and I met a friend of his at the U.S.O. place. A group of young women that I belonged to was going to have a dance, and I asked this fellow if he would like to go with me to the dance. He said he wasn't able to, but he had the perfect person that he wanted to introduce me to. So that's how I met my husband. He was a wonderful dancer—he is a wonderful dancer.

We had a great time at the dance, and that started things off. We went together for a year and a half. Then he was transferred to Fort Crowder, and he was away for about three or four months. And he decided that he wanted to get married. I had just, I had started Ohio State University, I think it was in January of 1944, and I went through the summer of that first year. I was working for a dentist after school, and his regular dental assistant was going on vacation, and they asked me if I would be willing to work for two weeks, I think it was during the Christmas break. So I said I would, and then my husband calls and says, "Would I come to Camp Crowder and get married?" He had already done the blood test. I said, "I just started this job. I promised that I would work for this dentist for two weeks full-time," and he said, "Oh please,"—you know. So I talked to the dentist, and he said, "Oh, go ahead."

So my mother and I went by train to Fort Crowder—Camp Crowder that was what it was called, Camp Crowder—and that's where we got married. We lived in a place that was right between

the town of Neosho, Missouri and Camp Crowder, and we were there all of a month when he was transferred to Philadelphia. Well my mother went home right after the wedding, or the next day. We went to California, which is where my husband was from. His folks were living there, and they weren't able to come to the wedding. So we went there. He was given a leave for a month, and we went there. I met his family, and we spent the night there.

Then we went to Philadelphia, and that was my mother's hometown. She was born and raised in Philadelphia. And so—oh, and my dad had died in 1943, in August of 1943, which is when I met Mike. So we went to Philadelphia, and I was staying with my aunt and uncle, my mother's older brother and his wife. My mother was alone in Columbus, and I said, "Why don't you, you know, get rid of stuff and come to Philadelphia? It's your home." You know, original home. And so she did finally. We had just moved. She had sold the house before Mike and I got married, and my older sister had gotten married in 1944, and my other sister had joined the Army Nurses Corps. And so, it was just my mother and me in Columbus. My mother sold the house and the business that my dad had, and we had moved into this apartment. And then I go off and get married, and we went to Philadelphia, and I said, "Mother why don't you just come?" So she did.

Anyway, Mike got out of the army in 1946 in May. I had been working in Philadelphia. I worked in a bank, and then I worked in the Naval Depot out there. And my mother worked—I don't remember. Anyway, so after Mike got out of the army we went to California, and we both went to school there. So, I got my B.A. at Berkeley and Mike got his Ph.D. Then we came to Missoula in 1949. We lived in strip housing out where the golf course is. I felt like a pioneer—we had a coal/wood stove to cook on and a space heater to heat the apartment, but it was very simple and burned these pine pieces.

I got pregnant shortly after we came here. We decided we'd start a family, and I got so sick from that pinewood that we burned—because it was free. It was cheap, and coal was kind of expensive, but we used a little bit of coal too. And anyway, so—oh, in Berkeley we had been kind of active. My husband came from a more active family than mine.

Dawn Walsh: That's what I was going to ask you, going back to your upbringing, and if there was any activity in your family that influenced you as you were growing up?

Flo Chessin: Well my mother and dad were active in the synagogue that we belonged to, and my father was orthodox, so I grew up that way. My mother kept a strictly kosher house. And they were both active there. My dad was a lawyer, but he was very kind hearted and a lot of his clients were poor people who didn't have much money. His brother, his youngest brother, had a linoleum store, and he got sick and wasn't able to take care of it. So my dad took it over to help out, and he and his sister ran the store. Then my mother worked with him after a while in the store. I remember my dad always listening to the news at night, but I don't remember them being, you know, really active in politics, although I knew they were Democrats. I remember when Roosevelt was running in 1936, and they had these little slogans, and I

remember repeating them. That's all I remember of politics in my family, but I know my folks always voted Democratic.

When we were students at Berkeley, we became active. There was a lot of activity there. There were a lot of speakers that would come to the university, and they would talk and give us speeches. We used to go to all of those. So we got—I got really interested in politics. I was in social work when I started at Ohio State, and I had to—I remember I was all of 17. I was 17, and I had to work with no training or anything. I was supposed to work in some community center or something. They sent me to this all Black community center, and the kids were almost as old as I was, and I wasn't really prepared. I didn't know how to handle things. But I was supposed to supervise them, and they played mostly games, I guess like basketball—I don't remember exactly what it was. But I really felt, you know, out of it. I didn't feel prepared. I hadn't had any courses or anything, so it was going cold turkey.

When I started at Berkeley, it was a graduate course. It had been an undergraduate course at Ohio State, and in Berkeley it wasn't, it was a graduate course, so I just took a liberal arts training. I did have to do some outreach work also. I remember I had a Brownies group, and I supervised a scout group, I guess, at this Black community center—I think it was—and we had a little group of girls that got together. I remember they wanted to have a few dances, and they would have the dances at night, and so my husband and I would go and supervise the dancing. They were fun, the kids were, you know, great dancers. Anyway, so, when we finished our training we came here to Missoula, and we've been here ever since.

Dawn Walsh: So I'm curious to know more about the work that you were doing as a high school student during World War II.

Flo Chessin: Well really all we did was we went around and collected the newspapers and asked people—they would fill up coffee cans with fat, which was used to make soap, and the scrap metal was used for military purposes. I guess things were melted down or—I don't know—all the scrap iron was sold to Japan I remember before the War. So then they tried to gather up as much as they could. I don't know how much good it did, but maybe it helped. And that was really all.

I remember the last year in high school they had started this program of training pilots, and so we took this aeronautics course, which told you how to fly. We had no experience in an airplane but just in the classroom, we were told how to fly, all the mechanics of it. I had taken some physics and chemistry—I wasn't very good in it. I really couldn't pass, I could pass the actual controls on paper, but I wasn't very good in the physics of it. But anyway, some of the boys took the classes, and they then did go into the Air Force, I remember, right out of high school. I remember one young man that I liked in high school, and he—I don't know if he went into the Air Force—he went into the military, and he was killed. I remember he was the one person that I really liked. That was really all that I remember as far as involvement in high school.

Dawn Walsh: What about any conversations or more emotional involvement versus physical activity?

Flo Chessin: Well, actually, during the War there were refugees that came to the states, and there were some that came to our hometown. My mother, I remember, took in some of the refugees. I remember there was one fellow, he was a rabbi actually, and he lived with us for, I don't know, maybe a year—I'm not sure how long. Anyway, he got married in Columbus, and he asked me to be a junior bridesmaid in his wedding, I remember that. Then, later there when I was about 15 or 16, I think, we had this German family that came to live with us, they were Jewish, and it was a husband and wife and their son, and I remember their son was a little older than me. He probably was the age of my, maybe my older sister who was only three years older than me. My other sister was only a year older than I. He taught us to play chess. We used to play chess that was my experience with chess. And they lived with us for, I don't remember how long, maybe close to a year.

Then I remember we had one other young woman who came to live with us. She was the last one. I don't think she was a refugee. I think she was an American gal from California, but she came to live with us. Oh, and I had a very close girlfriend who was a German refugee. She came over when she was about 13, and she was—I don't whether she was my next sister's age or whether she was between the two of us. But anyway, we were very good friends, and I really liked her. I remember a family in Columbus adopted her. I don't know, I think her parents probably were killed—you know, they would often send the kids off and try to save them at least. So this family adopted her. I remember we did things together, and she was part of that little girls club we had.

So I learned a little bit about the German refugee problem, and I knew about Hitler and what he—well I don't know when we knew about what Hitler had actually done, but I was aware that there was refugees and people were leaving Germany if they could. It was only later that I did a lot of reading about it. I read this book that told about how one of the last ships had got out of Germany. They came to the United States, and it was turned back and sent back to Germany or France, and those people were sent off to concentration camps and killed. But the politics were very bad; they were very active against Roosevelt acting to allow the Jews to come into this country, which is really a terrible thing. We could have saved so many lives. Then I would see war stories and the movies and then those reels, that sort of thing. So that's how I learned about a lot of things. I don't think, I don't remember really discussing it in school, like in History or Civics classes. I don't remember whether we ever talked about it, other than the war effort. I don't think we knew much or talked about it much in schools.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, thank you for sharing that. So let's go back to Berkeley, and you had mentioned that you were starting to get active. What were some of the issues that you were getting involved in at that time in Berkeley? And what year was that?

Flo Chessin: We were there from '46 to '49. We met some good friends. We started in the summer of '46, and we lived in coed dorm, my husband and I. And we met several of the couples in the dorm, and we became good friends. We stayed friends right through and still are, although we don't see them much, because one of them is dead—one couple—well the other two couples live in California. We used to drive down to California every other year and then later every year, so we would stop in and see our friends. But when we started flying, we just don't get to see them much.

Anyway, what were the issues? It was politics. It was about the Communists and the right wing. And I remember...oh, it was after, but I don't know... There were various speaker that came, and I remember Paul Robeson, I don't know if you ever heard of him. He was a wonderful Black singer and just a wonderful person, and he was very pro-communist. He had appeared in some movies. I remember that when we were students we could sometimes go to San Francisco, and we'd go to usher plays and things if we had time and wanted to. I remember this one time we offered to usher there, and Paul Robeson was playing. Anyway, what is that...I can't remember what that opera is, but he played—my memory is bad. Anyway, he was just wonderful. He played the Moore, and I remember Othello...what is that play? Anyway, he was wonderful. He became controversial. In fact, he was—he left the country to go to something in Europe, maybe France—France was quite open to Blacks. And they wouldn't let him come back in the country, because he was a Communist. But I remember, he came to campus once and spoke and then another time his wife came and spoke later.

I can't remember the other people that came and spoke, but there was various issues, political issues and probably most of it was about communism and socialism and fascism and that kind of thing. And we would go—you know, a lot of people would go. And also, I used... Well, in this course that I was taking, actually it was called recreation degree, but it was really a liberal arts thing. I had to take part in Music and Drama and then Economics and History and Political Science. I can't even remember all the stuff that I took. I don't remember those courses very well, but I do remember—what was I going to say? I can't even remember. I remember the social studies course that I took, and then I had to do crafts and I had to work at a summer camp. I remember this one craft teacher that taught us how to make things that kids would make in camps, like lanyards, and we make various things—I can't remember any of them. I remember one item here and one item there. But I remember a painting class, several painting classes, that I took, and one of them was Japanese type painting with a brush and that black ink kind of stuff. And I did oils and acrylics and stuff. And my teacher, one of my teachers said, "I hope you don't plan to be a professional artist, you're not very good." That's what he told me, but it was fun.

I took swimming and archery and—Oh, I know, it was folk dancing, and that was wonderful. I loved that. And then Mike being such a good dancer—he was really busy, because he had heavy science classes—so he would come. They had one, once a week they'd have an evening class of just free dancing, and so he would come and dance with me. I remember also, one time I met an Iraqi student who was at Berkeley at the university there, and he was in this folk

dance class. I had never met anyone from there. I didn't even know where Iraq was. But I think he probably—I don't know whether he was Jewish or not. But anyway, I remember I got to know him a little bit. We danced a little bit together. But we learned some wonderful folk dances.

Then when we came to Missoula there was a group that was going here—this one couple that became very good friends of ours. He was a teacher, a professor at the university in Speech and Drama. His wife was quite a folk dancer, and she taught dancing at this group. And so, Mike and I joined the group, and we danced. I think I danced up until I was six or seven months pregnant. But it was a wonderful group. Then the second year it started petering out, but we were very good friends.

After our first academic year here in Missoula, we lived there at the strip housing out where the golf course is, and then we moved out to Fort Missoula. There was faculty housing out there, and I was going to have our first child. We had been to a couple of parties at this apartment there, and it had been very comfortable, very roomy. We thought it would be seventh heaven, because the people that lived there, he was going off to get his Ph.D. someplace else, and he wanted to let the apartment. So we said that we'd love to take it. So we moved out there, and we thought it would be great.

The people that had lived underneath our apartment—we were on the second floor—he was the Chair of the Math Department. And they would spend about \$400 a season—this was in 1949 and '50, about '49 or '50, yeah—spent \$400 a year on fuel, which was not that expensive at that time. But he built a house in the Rattlesnake, and he moved out in September. We moved there in June, and I had baby in July, and he moved out in September. Then the new, young faculty English instructor moved in downstairs, and they were very poor, and they closed off all the rooms under us. The place was absolutely uninsulated. It was blazing hot in the summertime and freezing cold in the winter. And so when this young couple who lived down below us, they closed off most of the rooms—I think they lived in one room or something—and so it got very cold.

Our living room was, I think it was about as big as these two rooms; it was very big. These had originally been non-commissioned officers' housing. The living room was quite large, and it just had a small coal fireplace, which was just inadequate to heat that room—it was very big. And they had, again, a coal/wood stove in the kitchen, which I cooked on, and it heated our water, the water in the kitchen. The bathroom was next to it, and it heated those two. And I think the pipes—I don't know if they were actually on the outside, but they weren't insulated at all, and a couple of times, the pipes froze, and we'd have to get somebody to come in and thaw our pipes. So in the kitchen, we had this coal/wood stove. And then the people that had the apartment before had...

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

Flo Chessin: ...little...unless I had to have hot water, because I had to heat up the store. Anyway, so we lived out there, and we had a cat that one of our first friends in the strip housing had given us this cat, and it was afraid to go outside, because everybody had these big dogs out there—it was a lot of room. Have you been out to Fort Missoula?

Dawn Walsh: Uh, huh.

Flo Chessin: I should go out and see it sometime. They have a nice museum out there now, but it was faculty housing at that time and there was the military housing, which is larger homes and more substantial and separate. But they did have a swimming pool out there. We moved out in June, and it was quite warm, and so we would go and picnic on every night. We'd go somewhere, because we had to get out of that house in the late heat of the day. So, we would go and picnic up in Pattee Canyon, out at Miller Creek—at that time, Montana Power had a park there that was picnic areas. We'd go there. And we traveled around quite a bit. Anyway, we froze and sweated it out.

I remember our son was born July, and my mother came and stayed with us, and the cat would—one time, my mother said she would stay with Bert, our son, and Mike and I could go out for a few hours, and when we came back she said, "You have to get rid of that cat." It jumped up on the crib and just sat on our son's chest, and she was really afraid that something would happen. So we got rid of the cat, and I was not happy because it was kind of nuisance. I mean, we had to have a litter box, you know, up there, and we had to take it downstairs. It was a bit of a mess and a chore.

We had a wonderful garden out there—oh! You know, during the War we had prisoners from Italy that were stationed at Fort Missoula. I'm not sure if there were Japanese there too or not. But anyway, they were very good gardeners, and they really built up the soil. So, when we gardened out there, it was the first time we had ever had a garden, and it was fantastic. Things just grew like crazy. I remember the zucchini—we had never grown anything before, we didn't know how big zucchini was supposed to get, and we got bigger and bigger and bigger; one of them was five pounds. But mother was a wonderful cook, and she would make all kinds of wonderful dishes with the garden stuff. Then my husband's folks came the last week that my mother was there—I think my mother came for a month or six weeks, and then Mike's parents came for that last week. And we would go out picnicking with my mother and then with his folks. His dad was wonderful about picking apples. There was one place up—oh, another place we went to was Rock Creek—and there was a little old place, kind of a road...well, it wasn't really a road, a trail into an open area, and there were apples, an old apple orchard then that had been sort of abandoned. And so when my father-in-law—well I guess it was my mother too—they picked the apples, and then they would—my father-in-law would pare them and cut them up, and my mother would make this wonderful pie. Apple pie was great. We had a quite a crop of vegetables out there.



But I got pregnant again, and we decided that we wanted to move into town and buy a house. And so, we did. We bought a little house over on Kent. We lived there until our fourth child was born. He was about six months old, and we decided—we just had a little two-bedroom house, and we didn't want to put the kids in the basement. So we decided to buy this house. It took us all spring and summer to sell our little house over there, and then we were able to get this house, which was really great.

Oh, the one year, before we moved into this house, Mike had a sabbatical, or was it an exchange—I don't know. We went to England for a year, and I had the three kids. We spent a year in England, and that was wonderful. But we rented our house out, and when we came back, it was kind of a disaster. The woman had taken down our rug that was in the living room, and the septic tank had overflowed and destroyed the rug. It was a house with sort of a flat roof; it wasn't completely flat. It's built up, square like that, and the roof is a little lower than the top of that. It did slant a little, but you had to go up there in the wintertime and take off the ice, and the renters didn't know how to do it, and they chopped and made holes in the roof. And so when we came back, in one of the bedrooms the ceiling was completely down—it was just a mess.

Dawn Walsh: Oh, no.

Flo Chessin: We had to fix it up, of course, and then we sold the house, and we got this one.

Dawn Walsh: I'd like to.

Flo Chessin: Sorry I took so long.

Dawn Walsh: Oh that's fine. That's great to hear. So you were here in 1960 when I understand that was the first peace group?

Flo Chessin: Well '63.

Dawn Walsh: Oh '63.

Flo Chessin: Actually, we were here during the McCarthy hearings. That was a mess. And we—well, I wasn't very active, but my husband was a little bit. We were concerned about politics, elections and all. Then we had this missile crisis, and they were talking about fallout shelters. So, Bert Pfeiffer and my husband and several other people, one was a dentist, Dr. Hawkins, and a physician, and a geologist—I don't know, there were a half a dozen or so, I don't remember the exact number—that formed a group of scientists for scientific information to get out to the public. They were studying, they knew about the nuclear fallout and what a nuclear bomb, the devastation that it causes. So they were quite concerned, and they formed this group.

Then we found out that in the high schools the military was going into the high schools and recruiting young seniors in the schools to go into the military, and my husband and Bert Pfeiffer wanted to talk to the high school and give a different point of view. They wanted to talk about the fallout shelters and how they would not save people, what a long-term thing the radiation and all would be. So, they wouldn't let them—they wouldn't let anyone else go in and talk to them—only the military could talk. And our son was getting toward military age. So, I don't know, this was before—in '63 there were about a half a dozen families that got together. I don't remember how we had met them all; most of them were faculty. But there was one couple that we had met, and they were active in this church over here, and we decided to form a peace group. And that was the first peace group.

It was Missoula Peace Group, and what we did was we brought the Hiroshima exhibit to Missoula. We rented a store downtown on East Main Street, and we fixed up the store and hung all the pictures and had tables with some of the artifacts from the Hiroshima exhibit, and had a ribbon-cutting ceremony. We had the mayor of Missoula who was—I've forgotten his first name—but he cut the ribbon and opened our exhibit. We had a reception, and I have pictures of that. So that went on for two weeks. We had people that would stop in, and we had them sign the register, and they'd looked around—you know, they were quite interested. And then, the next year—well it was '63—in '64, Mike had an exchange visit in Minnesota, and we left for Minnesota. Then two or three other couples, one in the English Department, they left, and the other one in Mike's department, Botany, left. This other couple from over there went on to do something else. She formed a different group, the Osafists (?), whatever they are. It's kind of a philosophy, eastern philosophy. Half the group, you know, left, and so, the group folded. But then some of the other faculty people that I knew in 1967 we formed a group called Women's Spearhead for Peace.

That was the time that we thought our son was going to be of draft age, and we decided that we wanted to get the conscientious objection information out to the high school kids. And so, we got a hold of these booklets, and we asked if we could put them in the high schools. We asked if we could distribute them. They didn't want us to distribute them to them, but we did distribute flyers outside of the school. Then they did allow us to put a few books in the library. Then later, the campus organization started training and giving advice on conscientious objection. So that group didn't last terribly long. I mean, we did some of the work, and then people left, you know.

Then in '68 we got involved in politics, and the New Reform Party started, and Mike got involved. And we were promoting a fellow for governor from Montana. Then I met some of these women that I later asked when we started our peace group—in January of 1970, we started Missoula Women for Peace.

Dawn Walsh: And so that was your idea to start that group?

Flo Chessin: Well, it wasn't just mine, another gal that we knew and I decided we would have a tea and coffee and invite all these women, and see if people were interested in getting together and starting something, because the war in Vietnam was really active.

Oh, I forgot that in, I think in '63 what got us started on that peace group was there was a minister out at the First Christian Church on Russell Street. He was a blind minister, but he was very progressive, and he invited people to come to a meeting there. I remember it was at the time that Kennedy—John Kennedy was starting to escalate the military, send more troops to Vietnam. So we protested that. And I think it was out of that we started the peace group in '63. Then, so we started in 1970, and we had about 15 women that came, I think, to that tea or coffee or whatever it was. We had it here. We decided that we wanted to do something. We met here for the first 10 years or so, and we did various things. I remember we sent—one of our first acts—we started in January, and in February we decided we wanted to say something to the state legislature and to the—I don't know if we sent to the national also—I think we sent, at least, to our Senators and Congressman and to the Governor, and I know we sent to the state legislature and to the mayor and the city council and probably the county commissioners. And we just sent them all valentines, and we said, "There's no heart in war"—that was our big thing.

Then we would sponsor talks and programs, and we had some, I remember that we had Pat Williams when he was starting to run for Congress. We had a coffee for him, not here, but somewhere else and, I guess, later we had a fund-raiser here for him. I remember we used to have—the university didn't do much in the way of receptions after they had an interesting speaker at the university—and I remember that we had a couple of receptions here for a president of the Lawrence College—is it college or university? I can't remember. I remember we had Dr. Spock here after a talk that he gave at the university. Then later, the university started having receptions for these people. That was really interesting, and it was nice for me because I had little kids. Well, the youngest was a baby, and so it was kind of nice that I could just have it here.

Dawn Walsh: So when Missoula Women for Peace was getting started in 1970 did you have an idea of what you wanted to accomplish at that time?

Flo Chessin: Well we wanted to protest the war, the escalation of the military, and we wanted to try to end the war.

[Flo Chessin initiating a side conversation with Mike Chessin, her husband]

Flo Chessin: Mike was that when the Tet Offensive started?

Mike Chessin: Yeah

Flo Chessin: When was the Tet Offensive, was that in 1970 – the Christmas bombing?

Mike Chessin: Oh god, I don't remember the date.

Flo Chessin: But there was some particular happenings.

Mike Chessin: It was probably close to that time.

Flo Chessin: What was that thing—in the spring?

Mike Chessin: Kent State.

Flo Chessin: Oh that was the Kent State shooting.

Mike Chessin: Which I think was related to Cambodia—that's when Kent State...

[Flo Chessin returning to interviewer's question]

Flo Chessin: Anyway, there were protests going on all over the country. I remember earlier in our group we decided that we didn't want to affiliate with anything, but we would get newsletters from various groups. There was one group, Another Mother for Peace that started in California, and I remember they said something about, "No blood for oil." It was something about saving oil, places where we got our oil from—I don't remember; I don't have the details. But I remember that we got the newsletter from Another Mother for Peace. And then there was Women's Strive for Peace. And there were lots of protest groups, and so we would try to get literature from the various ones.

Then, actually in 1964, there was a woman who—I don't know, I guess we signed petitions and things. I don't know how people got our names. But anyway, someone contacted us and said that she was coming out to Missoula, and she would like to speak to a group. So, I went to that meeting, and it was a woman from Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. I was very intrigued with the group and decided that I would join. And that year that—it must have been in '63 because in '64 we went to Minnesota, and I had my last child there—but I joined that group of W.I.L.P. F and went to some of their meeting there. So in 1981, this other gal who was chair of the group at that time, I guess we were co-chairs, she thought we ought to join W.I.L.P.F. (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom), and so we did in 1981. So we became a branch then.

During the years we had fund-raisers, and we had a lot of different women that came, especially while the war was going on. A lot of women were concerned about their sons going into the military, and so a lot of them joined us. They would come and stay for a while, and once the war was over a lot of them left, but they wouldn't all come all the time.

We had trouble with Mrs. Angwin, whose husband was a colonel in the ROTC here, and she came to our group and did some things that we didn't like. For instance, we had a list of all our people that belonged to the group and those that supported us for our fund-raisers—not everybody could belong because they were working or one thing or another, but would support us, you know, financially—and so, we had this list that we passed out to our members. Well she got a hold of the list, and she took it to the military in Fort Missoula. We were really upset about her. Then we decided that we would go back to having meetings in our homes, so that we could keep her out. We didn't like to keep people out, but she was disruptive. So I remember we did that.

Dawn Walsh: So how, it sounds like a big part of the group being a women's group was the commonality of motherhood and the concern for their sons?

Flo Chessin: Most of them were mothers, but not everyone.

Dawn Walsh: And how has that played itself out over the years, how has belonging to a group of women working on peace affected you and how have you experienced that?

Flo Chessin: Well I think it helped educate me. I think we all bring—we get different sources of information. We get different magazines. We read different things. We see different things. And we try to—you know, we educate each other. We bring in things that we see and hear about and talk about it. So, I think we became better informed. We would sponsor coffees for different people—I remember, especially, we would ask our Congress people and Senators to come and speak to us, and then we would have—if they would come, and we would invite a number of people and get a bigger group and ask questions and show our concern.

We were very concerned about the nuclear weapons and then the missiles and the effects on people. I remember we had billboards; every so often we rented a billboard and would put a message up. I think one of the first ones, they were going to shoot—they were going to test a missile from Great Falls, and they were going to shoot it over Montana out to the Pacific Ocean, and we were very upset about that, because you never know if something is going to go wrong. And so, we rented a big billboard out on the highway—on the Interstate [laughs] interstate—on the interstate showing that—I don't remember what the message was, but we had various messages, peace messages. I remember one of them was out on Orange Street, and it set out three or four things—I don't remember. I wish I could find those pictures, because I just can't remember what they said. But I know that they were very effective, and it also brought attention to our group and brought new people in.

Then, one of the early things that we did, I remember, was at Christmas time. I think for the whole month of December we had a small ad down in the corner about so many more bombing days until Christmas. And that was very effective. Then we used to put it in the paper our meeting, and we always invited people to come. We didn't ever reject anyone, except that one woman—we did not like her.

We joined—you know, they started marches in 1966 from the university, started by university professors. A lot of people joined them. We would join the marches. I remember one time, some of us dressed up as Jeannette Rankin, because in 1972—I think it was '72, because I think the war ended in '73—and there was a Jeannette Rankin Day. Oh, and then we did these things at Malmstrom [picking up a piece of paper]. There was this—didn't I put a date on it—it was in the '80s, I guess.

Dawn Walsh: Was it in 1978, the Easter Peace Protest?

Flo Chessin: Yeah, right. Well we did it for three or four or five years. There was this minister, John Lemnitzer (?), from St. John the 23<sup>rd</sup> I think was his church, it was a Lutheran church, and he's the one that started it there, and so we joined them. A bus was rented, and a number of people signed up, and we would go on the bus to Malmstrom and protest. We would sing and have speeches and some of the people crossed the lines and got arrested.

Dawn Walsh: So, what was your involvement personally out there, what sort of role did you take?

Flo Chessin: I went. Well I didn't cross the line, because I was afraid. We were traveling. We were going overseas, and I didn't want anything to interfere with our ability to be able to go over. Because in '71 we went to Romania and we went again in '75. So I was afraid that they would use that as a way of preventing me from going. So I didn't cross the line, but some of our gals did. I remember May did and Alice—I'm not sure if Alice did—but I know some of them did. I felt guilty, I sort of wish I had. I don't know whether they would have stopped me from going overseas or not, but I just didn't want to jeopardize that opportunity.

Dawn Walsh: So how did those protests affect you?

Flo Chessin: Me? Well, I think they're inspirational. I remember one of the fellows—oh in the '80s, we had several men that joined our group—and one of them crossed the line. I think he did it a couple of times, and he was sent to prison, or maybe it was the one at Rocky Flats—I'm not sure. Anyway, he was sent to prison, and I wrote to him, and he wrote to me. He had a terrible time. It was really awful. But he was really changed after he came out of prison. I don't know I just got involved in various things. We started getting involved in our concern for Guatemala and then later El Salvador.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

Flo Chessin: Well I think between the political action and our peace group's actions, it just made us more aware and wanted to do more, as much as we could. So we would go to all the talks that we could and read all the information, all the literature we could, and we were just getting so much. Another thing we did, I remember we had a million-dollar bill, and I don't remember what it did—did Nancy tell you what that was for? It was probably the amount of money that we were sending in our taxes from Missoula that we passed out—I think that was what it was. I think it was money that we were paying in taxes here in Missoula Country that was going to military, because we started—I don't remember when we started—having these bake sales and handing out literature at the post office. We'll do it again this tax day. We did various things that, I just can't remember all of them, but we had little things like that. I used to save them, but someone went through a lot of my stuff in the house and got rid of a bunch of stuff, and so I lost some of the stuff and some of it I just haven't gone through yet. Everything keeps piling up here; I can't get to it.

Dawn Walsh: So can you talk about the work that Missoula Women for Peace did in getting the Jeannette Rankin statue in D.C., can you talk about that?

Flo Chessin: Well, yeah. We had meetings for about a year with some of the people from such responsibility in our peace group, and I don't know if there were others—maybe a few ministers, because we did at the U.C.C. House down here. Yeah, we met for about a year. Then, I wasn't involved in the hiring, but they had it in the basement here. One of the gals, Connie Skousen (?), was the one that really, I think—I know she did. She was on the committee to interview people to choose a director. But, yes, I was involved, Alice was involved, Connie was involved. I remember Anne Murphy, Dr. Murphy, was involved, and, I think, at least one of the ministers was involved, but I don't remember who all. But we met frequently. I don't know whether we met weekly there.

Then I remember there was a big problem with choosing a logo. That kind of discouraged me, because I thought, I wanted to see the group get going, and it seemed like the meetings were going on and on because they couldn't decide on a logo and all. I was concerned that we get it going and get in moving. And anyway, so it started in the basement. We started with Pat Ortmeier, and she was a great director; she really was very good. They've all been great directors. Each one brings a little different perspective to it. But Pat was very involved with the peace issues and with the environment and so was Lynn Tennefoss, who came next after that. She also was very concerned with the environment.

Dawn Walsh: So these are directors of the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center?

Flo Chessin: Yeah.

Dawn Walsh: So, what is your personal relationship with Jeannette Rankin, how do you think about her?

Flo Chessin: Oh, well I really did not know anything about Jeannette Rankin until we decided that. Well, Connie Skousen's husband had been in Washington, D.C., and he said that going through the hall of Congress there's a bunch of statues, two from every state, and Montana only had one. And Charlie Russell was the one, who wasn't originally from Montana, but he loved Montana and lived here for quite a while and painted about Montana. So, he suggested that maybe we should have a statue in Washington, D.C. and maybe—because Connie had been to Helena and had seen the statue of Jeannette Rankin in the Helena capital—and said that maybe we should have Jeannette Rankin in the hall of Congress as our second representative. So, we jumped on the idea. We thought it would be a great idea.

So, a half a dozen of us went to the Humanities Committee to ask about getting a—having a statue. I know that we went to Helena several times to talk to the whole committee about it. We discussed it and told them what we wanted, and they thought it was a good idea and they—I don't know who chose—I guess they chose the artist, the gal that had done the one in Helena. So, when the statue was completed some of us went to Washington, D.C. for the ceremony. Connie did a lot of work on it; she really did. She was a great organizer.

She had been to Washington, D.C. a number of times and arranged with the Humanities Committee and with our Congress people to have a reception, and we had actually a couple of them. I think our Senators, maybe our Congressmen—well Pat Williams sure would have been involved in that. They had an evening reception for us. We had a women's—the women organized a reception in the afternoon about 4:00, I think. We also, I think, had luncheon there in Washington, D.C. on top of the actual dedication. Tip O' Neil came, and he said that it was the largest, best-organized reception or affair for a statute dedication. So we were really pleased—we thought we were great stuff.

Another thing that was done, and then we had brochures made for the schools, and they were put in each school. I think every teacher was given—I know at least every school was given these brochures, and there were something that was made up that was for every teacher to try to tell them more about Jeannette Rankin. And there was only one book about Jeannette Rankin called *Flight of the Dove* that was written for adults, and then there was one that was written for children about her. I don't know if the center still has it. It may have gotten stolen or, you know, taken and not returned, eventually. Then I think there's a—I think someone might have done a thesis on her and maybe that's where the fellow that did the book on her got it from. But anyway, there was some information that was given to the schools about Jeannette Rankin.

I was not aware of Jeannette Rankin until we got started on this project; I had never heard about her, because I came from Ohio, and it had never really been discussed. Then I became informed, I read the book and read the other children's book to, and got interested in it. Then,



for two years we had Mother's Day teas over here at the Congregational Church. I remember that one of the women that we knew—she was the wife of a faculty member—was a niece of Jeannette Rankin's, and when she—I don't know whether it was when she died or when she moved—but she donated some stuff of Jeannette Rankin's to our peace group, and we had it at the second Mother's Day tea that we had here. We had silent auctions, and we were able to auction off some of these items of hers.

Dawn Walsh: Do you remember what some of those items were?

Flo Chessin: I remember one was a very nice, it was a wicker trunk sort of thing, and I know that Diane Sands got it; she bought it. I thought that I had bought both pair of her earrings, and I know there were several earrings. I don't know whether we had anything else. I know there were some earrings, maybe some memorabilia of hers—I don't remember. But we had other things to; it wasn't just Jeannette Rankin's things. That's how we raised money.

For a number of years we did—I remember our first fund-raiser we had at Nickie Funk's (?) house. We had two of them there, I think. We just invited people for wine and hors d'oeuvres, and they would have—I don't know if we had any auction items—I guess we had some auction items there. People would donate things, you know. So that's how we would raise money. Then, we had about two of them at Nickie's house, and then we started having these wine and cheese parties at the Christ the King church. We would raise \$1000 or so, and we would have—this Carson Vehrs would provide the wine, which we of course paid for, and we got cheese, and he would tell about the wines. He would bring a selection of wines and tell about them, and people would taste it and have their cheese and bread with it.

Then we would have an auction. And so, we would raise a \$1000 to \$1400 with these. But, you know, we had it year after year, and we got older and we got weary, and it got harder and harder, so we finally stopped. Then we would have the two Mother's Day teas, and that was a lot of work too. We decided that we just couldn't keep doing that. So then, we started in on the rummage sales, and we'd have one or two rummage sales a year.

Dawn Walsh: And how is that you spend the money that you raise, what are some of the ways that you use money?

Flo Chessin: Well we have sponsored different people. I remember there's this one gal that I have her letter, Judy Gorse (?), went down to—I forget whether it's El Salvador or Nicaragua. I think it's El Salvador—she went down there. People would go down there and try to help the people. I guess she had studied some Spanish, and she went down, and she lived with a family for about six months or so. Then, she came and told our group about it, and she said that she wanted to raise money for them to help them build a house, because I guess they were living in just a shack or something—I don't remember—or maybe it had been destroyed by the military—these groups. So anyway, we donated a couple of hundred dollars to her, and she

raised money from different places around the country. She said that our donation was the final donation that helped her get over the top, and they were able to get the house built. Then we had another young woman that came to us that was going to Yugoslavia, and she was working with women and children there trying to help them overcome the great stress that they were going through with the Milosevic-era wars. So we gave her money a couple of times. And we have sponsored—oh, Andrea Olsen, who was in our peace group for a while. Let's see, was she just out of law school? I don't know whether it was before she went into law school or while she was in law school, probably after.

Anyway, we had a couple of luncheons for women—I think it was like the Susan B. Anthony Day luncheons. We had a potluck luncheon a couple of times at the W.O.R.D. office, well at the place where they had conferences. I remember we had Maxine Van de Wetering speak to one of them, our first one. And then Andrea Olson, we had sent her to Geneva, Switzerland to be an intern for W.I.L.P.F. to become learned about what W.I.L.P.F. was all about and to come back. And so, she spoke at our second one that we had there. And then we haven't had any of those since the '70s.

We just kind of wound down a little bit, I guess. I don't know what else we've done. We have sponsored speakers at the university, and I remember May once spoke to a class or two at the university. Oh, and then we would have people come through here, people from W.I.L.P.F. or other people. I remember once, we had a big luncheon for a woman that was involved in the conversion from military to peaceful projects, and we had a big auction at the university for her. Then she gave workshops over here at the university.

We have sponsored other people, some from W.I.L.P.F., who came and talked. What else did we do? I know we did that maybe a half of dozen times. We had one big luncheon for Carol Williams and presented her with a gift, some painting or a quilt—I don't remember which it was. And then, I don't know whether it was the Jeannette Rankin Center or whether it was the Peace Quilters that decided they wanted to have a Peacemaker of the Year Award, and so that was in conjunction with our potlucks that we had started, and those were started in 1985, I think.

Dawn Walsh: And what were the peace potlucks?

Dawn Walsh: Well we would have a potluck there and have a speaker and someone that was coming through or some particular subject that we were concerned about. We would ask somebody from the university to come and speak to us. But then, we started getting people from El Salvador or Nicaragua. There's a Father Elias that comes through almost once a year, and now he's sending other people that come, and so, we usually have a potluck for them. I know we had potlucks a couple of times for the professor at the university in Sociology, Paul Miller, that speaks about hunger in Montana. Then we would have a potluck, and people would come and hear, and they'd get literature. So, that's the sort of thing that we've done over the years.

Dawn Walsh: And so what is it that keeps you going, keeps you doing this work? What drives you and inspires you today?

Flo Chessin: Well I...you know, my concern continues. We have a military budget that just is astronomical. I'm really concerned that so many of the Congress people want to keep building up and building up the military instead of working on peace issues. Oh, for a number of years we were working trying to get a Department of Peace in Washington, D.C. Well it wasn't just we—I mean it was a countrywide concern—but finally there was an Institute of Peace, which you don't hear anything about. But we felt like the military has just taken over so much of the money from our taxes and had just expanded and expanded, and there doesn't seem to be any control over them.

In fact, I've been collecting articles about the military. The most recent information is that they don't even know where some of their money goes, and they overspend on equipment—I mean, ten times or a hundred times what the thing should cost. And yet, especially the Republicans, but too many Democrats go along with it, keep throwing more money and more money at the military. We feel like the military needs to be reduced, not eliminated, but reduced, and money that would go for the military could go and help our schools and help our poor people and build housing, and help other people around the world. And there would probably be a lot less crime if there were—if some of these problems were solved. We know that it would reduce the crime rate, because it has many times.

So our concern continues. Once you're involved, it's hard to not continue. And then, we women have really become very close friends and enjoy each other company. In fact, Lois Hove has said several times that—she's always been involved. You know, she's involved in a lot of things in her church and concerns, you know, social concerns, and she said that she just doesn't get much feedback or support from those women in the churches, that they're concerned but they don't do anything much. They do send packages to Kosovo and some places, supplies like toothpaste and soap and washcloths and tooth brushes and hygienic equipment and school supplies to, maybe down in El Salvador and some of the poor, and African countries like that. But she said that our own group just gives her, buoys her up—gives her inspiration, and she just loves the group. I think that we've really gotten to know each other so well and enjoy each other's company and enjoy working together, seeing what good we can do—little that it is, but we keep trying.

Dawn Walsh: So it sounds like you're really motivated by just a real basic inequality that you see in terms of how people are treated and what needs are met and not met.

Flo Chessin: Right. Some of us have worked on Meals on Wheels. I know Alice has done a lot of volunteer work on various things. I mean, she was on the board of Council Groves, and she worked in senior citizens and a number of groups. She has always been active in the Democratic Party and lobbying for people and solicited. I mean, she would man the offices with

other people and support them financially as well as go out and go door to door for candidates that she wanted to support. In fact, that's how I met her was through the Democratic Party and some of the others too.

Dawn Walsh: So I'm curious how you would describe or define your philosophy of peace.

Flo Chessin: Well I'd like to see an end to warring, and I think it's really awful. I was reading through, the other day, some old literature that I have that W.I.L.P.F., for instance, was talking in—I guess it was in the early '80s or mid-'80s or maybe it was the '70s—I can't remember for sure. I'll have to go back and look at it again. But they were hoping that by the year 2000 we would put an end to war, and here we are more wars than ever before all over the world. I mean it's tragic.

I think poverty and ignorance plays a big part in it and allows certain people to manipulate and control their people. I mean, people get in power, and then they become dictators. They control the weapons, and then they control police, and they control the people, and the people are just left to suffer in so many countries. That's been true in Guatemala and much of the Latin American, many of the Latin American countries, certainly in Africa and Asia, and even in this country. Look at us—I mean, we have so many poor people and hungry people and jobless people. I mean there will always be problems. I don't think we'll ever solve all the problems, but at least we have to work at it and do what we can to try to alleviate some of the suffering and see if we can educate people to be more concerned and to get involved.

Dawn Walsh: So, I just am thinking about how being a mother was a big part of your getting involved in peace group initially, and so I was wondering how you incorporated your ideas of peace into you home life and into raising your children?

Flo Chessin: Well we would talk about things, about the political situation or the social concerns that were involved with politics. We used to all get together at the dinner table, and we would discuss things. I would try to get my kids to join us in some of the activities and marches as they had time. And my youngest, Esther, that owns Bernice's Bakery, when she was little I'd take her to the meetings and I'd take her on the marches.

It's interesting because our kids are all concerned, but only a couple of them are active. I know our oldest son is very concerned and active in things. Sonya doesn't have time; she's so involved with her kids, but she supports things when she can and comes when she can, which is hard these days because her kids are so involved in things, not only in school, in music and sports—and so, she's running around. I mean, she's working during the day, and then she's running around chauffeuring the kids and then going to the concerts or the sport things. So she's not so active.

Our other daughter, our second daughter, was very active in political things in high school. Sonya was more on the Student Council and that sort of thing, but our other daughter was

more involved in the political stuff. And she joined the W.I.L.P.F. in Seattle and was going to meetings and things when she could. But then she went to school for six years, and she was taking heavy science courses, and then she was in—

[End of Tape 2, Side A]

[Tape 2, Side B]

Flo Chessin: ...things when she can. Our two younger ones are sympathetic and supportive. I mean Esther will support it financially or with donations from the bakery. Our son in Idaho, he's sympathetic, but I don't know, he's not active in things. But I think that because of their work and their young children and all, maybe later when the kids are older they'll have more time to be involved. I know that they all feel pretty much the way we do, but are not as active.

I wasn't active very much when the kids were small, although I did join the League of Women Voters when our third child was born, because of a friend of mine who got me into it. And I used to go to all the meetings, and I enjoyed that. But then when our peace group started, I found that I just couldn't do the two groups, and so I dropped out of the League. But I do go to their luncheons and if they have talks, I usually go to those. I come to meetings that are on things that I'm interested in, and I try to stay active that way. So I think I'll always be active as long as I'm able. It just kind of gets you once you get involved, and it's fun and it's stimulating, and I learn all the time.

Dawn Walsh: Great. Well, we're going to wrap it up, as they say. But before I turn the player off, I'd just like to open it up to anything that you want to say that you haven't said yet or if there's something that you would like to say that we haven't or any closing remarks or anything.

Flo Chessin: Well no, I just hope that the peace group or the peace center can continue and thrive, and I'd like to see many more people join the Jeannette Rankin Center. And you're always welcome, any of them, to come to our peace group meeting. But, yeah, I'm really concerned about the Jeannette Rankin Center, and I want to see it do well. I'm hoping that they can get that room finished very soon. I think that will help bring people in, and I think that the new store look is great. I like the openness of it, and I think they have nice things, and I hope more people will support it. I think they've done a great job there.

I'd like to see the global village idea be renewed. They used to have talks by various students from foreign lands to tell about their countries, and it was open to the public, and they used to have some very interesting discussions. I think that there are a lot of things that the Center can do once they get that room finished, and if they can get more people involved in helping it. So there are a lot of good ideas that come out of the Center, and we always like to support them and do what we can to help them along. I enjoyed being on the board, but I'm happy to off the board now. I just hope that they can get some really good financial support to keep it going.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, well thank you very much.

[End of Interview]